

## A Word, in the Wilderness

2 Advent C, 12/5/21

We speak and pray today *in memoriam* Tate Myre, 16, Madisyn Baldwin, 17, Hana St Juliana, 14, and Justin Shilling, 17, murdered this week in Oxford, Michigan.

May God have mercy upon them and upon all whom malice has slain and pity, helpless, mourns.

Fans of this program and its broadcasts, or at least those who often listen to them, will know that I like to spend time outdoors – not necessarily a long time, but always a good time. There’s something refreshing about being out in the woods and fields under a cloudless sky in the sunshine, and something differently refreshing about being out there under the lowering clouds preceding a storm. There are joys to be had in the first near-warm days of spring, when the trees bud and flower in pinks and whites, lavenders and chartreuses seen at no other time. Different joys come in the depths of autumn, with different colors not often seen, the dark reds and pinkish undersides of certain maples, the bright yellows of alders and other maples, oranges in every color but that of an actual orange, and the stubborn brown of clingy oak leaves. Both seasons are rich, in the deep weeds, with the scent of leaves and wood turning back into soil, the calls of herons and geese, and (if you’re in the right woods) the soft lap of lakewaters against gently sloping shores. Ah, to be the woods in spring or fall. Is any place more refreshing? Yet those who love – as I, too, love – the seaside know of its joys, as do those who enjoy walking through the desert, climbing mountains until they look down on clouds, sitting in the cool waters of creeks and stream while summer blazes, or going on snowshoes across frozen lakes and fields when winter’s ice sets hard enough to let them. Out there, in the wild, or in the near-wild that is as close as most of us get to it, we find a refreshment and rejuvenation that we often need more than we realize. Out there, we may find a peace and maintain a sanity that would otherwise elude us. These things can be hard to come by inside a building, or with any company, as much as we all love the pleasures of hearth and home, wherever it is we find good cheer, and shelter from life’s storms.

I raise all this on our 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent Sunday morning – on what might as well be called Wilderness Sunday, given the gospel set for it – to note that whatever it is that drives people like John into the wilderness, it isn't simply a desire to enjoy it, get away, or get a bit of exercise and some fresh air. It isn't even to stay sane; how sane can one be who has heard the words of the Living God? Even if one could, it would be the hustle and noise of the city that help far more than mountains, trees, or sand. Prophets know very well who they are, though they may not want to accept it – think of Hosea and Jeremiah. They also know pretty well what the Lord wants them to say, though they may not be ready to say it – think of Jonah or Isaiah. They may feel up to the task, as did such prophets as Amos and Baruch, the latter of whom we heard in the first lesson preaching the good news of peace and of exiles' return. A prophet may not feel up to their task, as was true at times for Moses and even Elijah, held by many to be the greatest of them all. Yet prophesy they did, and prophesy they still do. We most often hear their words in a voice of the wilderness, that place of tests and wanderings, of temptations and revelations, and of wonders and dangers found nowhere else. That's why they go out there – to listen for those voices, to absorb the one most suited to what they know they have to say, and to embody that voice when they return among their people.

You will no doubt correct me, and remind me that what Luke speaks of, following what Isaiah spoke of, is a voice *in* the wilderness crying, not a voice *of* the wilderness crying. Ah, I have to admit, that is what comes down to us in the translations we have, prepositions such as “in” and “of” being the ball-bearings of English, and on them great matters turn. Yet I would also say that a voice *in* the wilderness very quickly, one might say necessarily, becomes a voice *of* that wilderness, and not merely by echo. To go into the wild, or even the near-wild of a state park or natural forest, and to speak aloud within it, perhaps to it, is to hear the sound of your own voice resound against the rocks and trees, leaves and waters of that wilderness – or, in John's case, the bare rocks, scree, and desiccated trees that populated the wild lands of his time. Speaking in this way, one speaks alone, and one hears alone. Some, like me, may be embarrassed by this, but any

of us who did this would quickly understand how little difference whatever we have said has made in the wilderness, and that when we finish speaking, nothing will have changed. Silence will return, that is, and there will be no sound but the sound of the wind, or some wild thing expressing its need or fear in a voice that is not human, and that speaks without using words. One may whisper to the wild land, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" One may tell the valleys that they will be raised, or tell the mountains that they will be made low. One may whisper that they all will see the Lord's salvation as the people of the land return unhindered to it, or one may scream it. Either way, when one has finished, nothing will have changed, except that one has expressed oneself to no-one in particular, and is the only one who could've been changed by what one has said.

It is then, I submit, that one will hear the other voice, or voices, *of* the wilderness, if one listens. I don't mean that other wanderers will pipe up and ask you what's the matter, tell me more; or that hunters, hitherto camouflaged as they stalk the whitetails or wild turkey, will quietly but firmly ask you to keep it down, you'll spook the hoof-meat; though either could happen. I do mean that you will hear a voice that breezes through the autumn leaves, babbles over the stones in the river, or distills the dry silence of the desert into prayer. You will hear it and say to yourself, "Oh, yes. This is what matters. To be here, now, and fully present to it, that this moment might not pass away." You will forget yourself, then know yourself as part of all that is out there and yet distinct from it. If you are lucky, if you are focused in mind and body, you will realize what the speaker in Wallace Stevens' poem "The Snow Man" realizes at the end of that poem. It goes like this:

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, that's it – “nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is.” Whatever that is, whatever those two nothings say to you, will be the word for you to bring back to those for whom you came out here. You will be able to help them see what they need to see, hear what they need to hear, change what they need to change, do what they need to do, and become who they were born to be. You will, if you are John the Baptizer, then be able to prepare the way in your own day for the Lord himself to come – in the person and likeness of your cousin, even, the thong of whose sandals you will think yourself unworthy to untie, but who needs to hear the word you bring just as much as everyone else does. You will know what is, what it means, and what can be in response to it. You will finally be, like Simeon, at peace, having seen the Lord's salvation welcome people to their forever home, making this Earth the paradise it was meant to be, and not the indifferent planet people found it to be or the hell we made it become. You will have no illusions, but clarity – of mind, of heart, of purpose, and of vision.

In that spirit, in that voice we will do what Baruch prophesied the people would do back then: put off the garment of sorrow and affliction, put on the robe of righteousness, and wear in your own person the beauty of the glory of the living God, going forth in joy and hope. Going forth thus, we will be what every prophet has always been: peace in a world grimed with violence, hope in a world plagued by malice and despair, and truth in a world smirched with lies.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45235/the-snow-man-56d224a6d4e90>.

The world needs it, needs them, so prepare ye the way. *Amen.*